

M 168 THE ANCESTOR CULT OF THE NGONI

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576 her daughters had died, and the herd of cattle was either inherited by the senior daughter's eldest son or divided among the sons of different daughters. Cewa informants said that quarrels constantly arose over the ownership of cattle, and two modern developments—the spread of *utengwa*¹ marriage and of a patrilineal form of *mbumba* with its repercussions on cattle acquisition and disposal—caused further tensions in Cewa society.

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571 The role which cattle played in Ngoni social life partly depended on the structure and inter-relationships of the Ngoni social groups. The house and the family within the larger village unit were so organized that group ownership and group disposal of cattle caused no permanent friction. There were arguments about the disposal of cattle, but they were temporary and relatively trivial. The strength of tradition in the concept of ownership, and in the values and attitudes inherent in cattle-owning and keeping, was firmly established and was related to modern needs by the ingenuity of the Ngoni in manipulating traditional practices to suit new situations. Cattle therefore strengthened the integration of existing social units, and helped to preserve that unity and cohesion in Ngoni society which the ancestors were said to commend and to wish for. On this plane of conformity to a required pattern, cattle influenced the living and their behaviour. They also, through the structure and function of the houses, belonged to the spirit who was guarded in a particular house. As we shall see in Chapter IV, the ritual formula of address to the ancestor at the sacrifice of a beast was always 'Here is your beast . . . Here is your meat.' The living and the dead were joined therefore in the common ownership of a herd or part of a herd. The actual practices in social and ritual life where cattle were concerned, and the ideas and concepts from which the practices arose, will take up most of this chapter and form the necessary prelude to the further analysis of the ancestor cult.

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171 Ownership of cattle and care of herds

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65] The war of the cattle-tax' was the name given in the central kingdom to the installation of dipping tanks in the 1930's and the levying of a tax of a shilling per head of cattle on all cattle-owners. The attempt by the Government to focus responsibility for dipping and to collect the taxes due brought out clearly the difficulties of applying English conceptions of ownership to the Ngoni. In the English meaning of the word ownership, a man can claim as his possession cattle which he has bought or inherited, and their offspring. This individual ownership means that he alone has the right to sell the animals or their milk, to regard the profits from such sale as his, and at any time to kill an animal for meat. He can will them to his descendants or to anyone he chooses after his

¹ Marriage in which the man took his wife to live in his village, but did not give lobola for her.

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cattle never came back to the kraal in the evening without one or more of the senior men standing by the gate and watching them and counting them as they went in. Sick cattle were noted and the herd-boys questioned about them. Mating was observed and noted, but not regulated, though poorly developed male beasts were sometimes castrated by one of the men who had acquired skill as a cattle doctor. Such a man would also administer drenches and other medicines, but the responsibility for calling a *sing'anga*, the specialist in medicines, to perform a ritual for a sick beast was taken by the whole group. They also made the decision to call a *sing'anga* to protect the kraal against lions. On several occasions I was in a village where lions attempted to get into the kraal at night, and the next morning the senior men who were responsible for the herd discussed the efficacy of this or that man's 'lion medicine' and decided who should be sent for to make the kraal safe again.

Important decisions were taken from time to time about placing the cattle belonging to the herd of a house in other kraals. This custom of *kuikhila* (lit. to entrust) was common in the central kingdom and had been adapted to modern needs as one means of evading the cattle-tax by appearing to have few cattle, whereas a number were boarded out in other areas. This boarding out was a long-established custom of the Ngoni and was practised for various reasons. One reason, and probably the most important formerly, was to build up good relations with leading men in the outlying villages by entrusting cattle to their care. The reward if the cattle thrived was often the gift of a beast, and this was one means by which men of local tribes could build up a herd. It was also a signal honour to have cattle entrusted in this way and it was acknowledged by sending to such a 'keeper' the head of any beast killed from this herd. Another reason for boarding out was to prevent diseases spreading among a whole herd all kept in one kraal, and yet another was a belief that certain men had latent power with cattle, and that beasts put in their care thrived and multiplied. This emphasis on enlarging the herds by natural increase was the main motive for letting the calves have all the milk they needed in order that they might thrive.

The uses of cattle and cattle products

Many of the uses to which cattle were put and for which they were greatly valued have been referred to in this chapter and in earlier sections of this book. We shall now examine the consumption of meat, milk and blood as food, and the forms of exchange in which cattle were directly exchanged or converted into cash. The ritual use of cattle will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

The testimony of early Europeans in Nyasaland and the accounts by the Ngoni of their life in the pre-European period agree in giving the consumption of meat, milk, and blood a high place in the diet of the cattle-owning families. It was a widespread European criticism in the

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THE THRESHOLD OF ADULTHOOD (II)

the older herd-boys when they were discussing 'cattle problems' in the evening. They took them into the kraal and showed them signs of the cattle not being well from the condition of the skin, udders, hoofs and mouth. The older boys were also called to be present if medicine was given to cattle, either some specific known to the owners, or treatment given by a 'specialist' called in, who might have real skill and knowledge about sick animals or be trying his luck with secret remedies known only to himself. The herd-boys were taught to notice the condition of other cattle than the ones of which they had charge, and to report on them. These might be cattle in other villages, or cattle belonging to their father's house 'boarded out' in another kraal according to Ngoni practice. The older herd-boys went with their father and his brothers to local markets where cattle were bought and sold, and listened to arguments about their condition which could make a difference of several pounds in the price they fetched. [232] ●

When it had been decided in the village to kill a beast, for eating, or for selling the meat, or for a sacrifice, it was usually a young adult who was called to spear the animal. Some young men became adept at planting the spear behind the left shoulder in such a way that the beast dropped dead at once. At times two or more stabs were necessary, but it was a matter of pride and no small skill to succeed the first time. The senior herd-boys, who had driven the animal out of the kraal after separating it from its fellows, stood close round and watched attentively, for the stab had to be both accurate and forceful. The reputation of being skilful at killing a beast, of being a 'one stab' man, was greatly desired by herd-boys. They coveted equally the reputation of being skilful at flaying the beast. With carefully sharpened knives, in a few quick deft strokes, the young men slit the skin, opened it up and began to cut up the carcase. Like assistants at a surgical operation, the senior herd-boys held the knives, lifted a limb, turned back the skin, collected the blood, removed the